Fighting for Social Justice, by David Burgess

reviewed by Leon Howell in the October 10, 2001 issue

David Burgess does not go gentle into fights. At 84--after working for 14 years with farm workers and laborers in the South, spending 11 years in the Foreign Service (mostly in Asia), 11 years with UNICEF (some in Asia) and 11 years as an inner-city pastor in Newark, New Jersey--he strives now, with characteristic fervor, for low-income housing in Benicia, California, where he has been for, yes, 11 years.

Burgess once wrote: "Instead of receiving the full loaf of the Christian gospel in words and deeds, the dispossessed migrants, tenant farmers and sharecroppers . . . too often have received the stone of paternalism, Christian charity." That statement offers an indication of the kind of social views that have motivated him throughout his life.

Burgess's autobiography surprises one with its candor and its twists, turns and bumps. On the surface, the story of his life seems to embody an outmoded ecumenical (or "social gospel") cliché. He was born in China of missionary parents and remembers playing in the courtyard of the Peking YMCA. He entered Union Theological Seminary in 1940 and almost went to prison during the first months he was there. He had affiliated himself with the "Union Eight," who opposed the first peacetime draft.

Burgess met his wife Alice at a student Christian conference. After they were married, she once received a standing ovation for ruling him out of order when she presided at a national meeting. Burgess was ordained in 1944 in the Congregational Christian Churches (now the United Church of Christ).

His life was neither predictable nor triumphal. Readers will be especially impressed by the Burgesses' unflagging commitment to the struggle for justice. There were many setbacks. Burgess spent the better part of a year in the late '40s as a CIO organizer trying to create a labor union for 2,000 workers at a J. P. Stevens plant in Rock Hill, South Carolina. It failed. For a year he worked on the unsuccessful 1950

campaign to reelect the highly regarded liberal, Frank Graham, to the U.S. Senate. He headed the first Peace Corps contingent to Indonesia--a contingent called home in 1965, the "year of living dangerously" when Indonesia exploded into a turmoil that resulted in the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of people. Back in Washington, his effort to recruit industrial workers for the Peace Corps were met with such bureaucratic resistance that they collapsed in failure.

But Burgess's commitment to work for what he perceived to be just causes never wavered. "There are no lost causes," he quotes Norman Thomas as saying, "only causes that have not been won." Burgess's religious faith sustained him throughout. And he had his successes, such as "the purchase of the Delmo Homes in Missouri by their farmworker tenants in 1945, the reduction of childhood diseases in Thailand in the 1960s, and the saving of 9,000 public housing apartments in Newark . . . in the 1990s." "Win some, lose some, but never give up," he writes.

Required to retire from UNICEF at 60, he searched long and hard for a job. Finally, he was called to pastor a struggling white congregation in predominantly black inner-city Newark. "Now all I had to do was figure out how to be a pastor," he writes. During his years there he integrated two white churches, got engaged with the city's pressing issues and headed the creative Metropolitan Ecumenical Ministry.

Burgess tells a story of grit and inspiration, of tenacity and grace. As Bill Moyers says in the book's foreword, "If we are to breathe new life into the meaning of citizenship, recapturing the notion of citizens as moral agents, we will need models and mentors, of whom there are no finer exemplars than David and Alice."